

# Confessiones

A personal story about the human turn

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## Why Confessiones?

I am not aware of any adequately theorized, coherent field of study, no comprehensive and complete perspective concerned with the relation between the humanities and welfare state research.<sup>2</sup> Even though social policy as a political concept during centuries has been colored by moral views on poverty and the poor, social policy as a scientific concept has only recently acknowledged that any analysis and explanation of developments in practical social policy and its outcomes falls short if it neglects the values, norms and beliefs of the actors involved, their understanding of the situation they are in, and their world-views. We are actually fumbling in utter darkness.

In the absence of a coherent understanding I have called this contribution “Confessiones”, because I simply give you my personal story about the ‘human turn’ – my human turn.

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<sup>2</sup> It is to be hoped that the project “Welfare narratives. Studies on the role of authors and the subject of welfare in Danish post war literature” will develop at least parts of “the missing link”. “Welfare narratives” is a project financed by the Velux Foundation and headed by professor, Anne-Marie Mai, University of Southern Denmark. There are close linkages between that project and the project: “Danish Welfare History” headed by professors Jørn Henrik Petersen and Klaus Petersen, both of University of Southern Denmark, and financed by the Carlsberg Foundation.

## The one-dimensionality of economics disappoints a young student

In 1963 I did begin studying economics. My motive was a deep rooted interest in the society in which I lived. But studying economics from that perspective was like asking for bread and be given a stone. A strange one-dimensionality characterized economics which was only marginally belonging to the social not to say the human sciences. Impressed by for example Paul Samuelson's *Foundations of Economic Analysis* from 1947 economics had increased its import of mathematics. In this sense economists felt that they were approaching the sciences, but they did not acknowledge that they were removing themselves from the daily problems of society. For me the only breathing holes were the lectures in economic history and the so-called subjects of policy, for example agricultural policy, tax policy, and social policy.

In particular social policy as lectured by professor Jørgen Dich caught my interest, but even that subject was conducted within an economic paradigm meaning that social policy as an academic subject was defined as the science of public transfer payments, i.e. negative taxes, placing it on an equal footing with tax policy.

## My first years in Odense

In 1970 I was asked to come to Odense University to develop a new academic education aimed to educate coming heads of the growing number of institutions in the wake of the great period – the 1960's – of the Danish welfare state, and in 1974 I was appointed as professor of social policy. I was still teaching in the Dich'ian way understanding social policy as an economic subject and the welfare state as an institutional mechanism for running the economy with an eye also to distributional issues.

## A visit to Germany

Some years later I was invited to a lecture tour in Germany. On several occasions I was asked by German colleagues why the Danish welfare state at its origins was that different from the German and why it had had a development of its own. Germany had taken the first steps towards a welfare state in the 1880's by introducing mandatory insurances for the working people, and Denmark followed in the 1890's but in quite another manner. We introduced a scheme of old age assistance relying on a tax-financed pay-as-you go method, and our scheme in case of illness was built on voluntary insurance supported by public subsidies.

Why did you not, the German colleagues asked, imitate the German ideas? Why did you develop a system which actually became an alternative model later to be imitated by for example Great Britain?

It was a bit embarrassing to admit that I was at a loss for an answer. But I promised to go back home and find out what the answer to that simple question was.

It soon became apparent that the answer was not that easy. Actually I did work with the question for a couple of years and wrote a treatise which was accepted to be defended for the doctoral degree in history.<sup>3</sup> I had almost turned into becoming a historian.

In order to answer the question of my German colleagues I had to learn that comparative analyses across countries necessarily draw the attention towards the humanities in general and the 'cultural factor' in particular. The reason, obviously, is that different 'cultural factors' are of decisive importance in order to understand different answers to similar questions (problems). In

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<sup>3</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen 1985, *Den danske aldersforsørgelseslovgivnings udvikling I, Oprindelsen*, Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense.

fact, the German precedent in the Danish context did serve as a negative foil not to be imitated – partly for political, partly for cultural reasons.

This observation – that international, comparative analyses promote a turn towards ‘the humanities’ – is confirmed by the “Wirkungsgeschichte” of Esping-Andersen’s idea of the three welfare regimes each of them relying on a specific ideological and cultural base.<sup>4</sup> His thinking has later been broadened by including also differences regarding religious beliefs and the place of women in different cultural settings.<sup>5</sup>

### My love affair with the media

Having completed my dissertation I was – for other reasons – appointed as the first chairman of *Danish TV2* to be developed from scratch. Until then I had served as chairman of the board of the regional newspaper *Fyens Stiftstidende* so I was and became to a growing extent aware that journalism and history shared a number of characteristics. They did show first and foremost that the reality was not one-dimensional. I was more and more convinced that the human turn of welfare state research – the call for knowledge of the human – was a necessity. It is an obvious insight as soon as you understand that a societal project i.e. developing the welfare state cannot have its offspring in calculations and technocracy, but demands values embedded in culture as part of the common inheritance.

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<sup>4</sup> Gøsta Esping-Andersen, 1990, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Philip Manow 2008, *Religion und Sozialstaat, Die konfessionellen Grundlagen europäischer Wohlfahrtsstaatsregime*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York; Kees van Keesbergen & Philip Manow 2009, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York.

## Genuine conversion

Following my chairing of TV 2 I was asked by the vice-chancellor of the University to develop a new academic education for journalists and to manage that education for some years. During this period I wrote about the legitimacy of the welfare state,<sup>6</sup> welfare and values,<sup>7</sup> the moral foundation of the welfare state<sup>8</sup> as well as the spirit of the welfare state and the ethics of Protestantism.<sup>9</sup> At that time I was certain that my genuine conversion into being spokesman for the integration of cultural analysis into welfare state research had taken place.

I was convinced that paying attention to ideas, values and beliefs, culture, media, language and art is contributive to our understanding of social policy as a constitutive element of the welfare state. The welfare state is not and has never been a 'technical solution'. The welfare state is simultaneously a carrier of and carried by values such as solidarity, equality, justice, trust, freedom, benevolence etc. Values are the glue ensuring societal cohesion.

## Cooperation on the 13-series

This became even clearer to me when I started my cooperation with Klaus Petersen on the so-called 13-series covering five booklets on the characteris-

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<sup>6</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen 1996, *Vandringer i velfærdsstaten: 11 bidrag om velfærdsstatens legitimitet*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense. See also Jørn Henrik Petersen 1999, *Moralske Epistler*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense.

<sup>7</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen 1997, "Velfærd og værdier", i Per Thygesen Poulsen (red.) *Ansvar og værdier*, Centrum, 1997, Viby.

<sup>8</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen, 1998, "The Moral Foundation of the Welfare State versus the Mechanism : A Contribution to the Philosophical and Theoretical Issues in Social Security Today", *Journal of Welfare and Social Security Studies*, Vol. 52: 12-26.

<sup>9</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen 2000, "Velfærdsstatens ånd og protestantismens etik" i *Väntan på Framtiden*, Försäkringskassförbundet og Socialvetenskapliga Forskningsrådet, Stockholm: 20-37.

tics of the welfare state and the challenges this very state is confronted with.<sup>10</sup> The contributors included economists, historians, statisticians, sociologists, theologians, gender-researchers, lawyers, political scientists, researchers on culture. Even though these booklets were popular by nature they mirrored an opening of the field of research on the welfare state.

Not least the booklet *13 values underlying the Danish welfare state* argued that there is an undeniable relation between culture and welfare state in the normative as well as in the positive sense. I have – in cooperation with my former ph.d. student Lis Holm Petersen – used this insight to develop a normative theory of the Danish welfare state based on the theologian Knud Løgstrup's classical work *The Ethical demand*.<sup>11</sup> I shall return to that in closing my contribution. Simultaneously, however, we tried to demonstrate the close connection between such a normative theory and the positive fact that the Danish welfare state is founded on the principle of universalism and the application of a tax-transfer mechanism. The decoupling of taxes and transfer payments means that the classical Danish welfare state relies on the principle of 'something for nothing'. There is a correspondence, therefore, between the normative and the positive analysis.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Klaus Petersen (red.) 2003, *13 Historier om den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Klaus Petersen 2004, *13 udfordringer til den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Klaus Petersen 2005, *13 reformer af den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Klaus Petersen 2006, *13 løsninger for den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense; Jørn Henrik Petersen Klaus Petersen & Lis Holm Petersen 2007, *13 værdier bag den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense.

<sup>11</sup> Knud Løgstrup 1956, *Den etiske fordring*, Gyldendal, København. See also Knud Løgstrup 1996, *Etiske begreber og problemer*, København.

<sup>12</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen 2006, "Velfærdsstatens normative grundlag", *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, vol. 48: 5-24; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Lis Holm Petersen 2007, "Næstekærlighed og velfærdsstat", i Jørn Henrik Petersen, Klaus Petersen & Lis Holm Petersen (red.), *13 værdier bag den danske velfærdsstat*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Lis Holm Petersen 2007, "Gensidig eller ensidig?

## The project *Danish Welfare History*

Again in cooperation with Klaus Petersen I have during the last four years been responsible for carrying through the large project *Danish Welfare History* financed by the Carlsberg Foundation. Four volumes have been published<sup>13</sup> and the remaining two are in the oven.<sup>14</sup>

The project gives great emphasis to values, norms, ideas, attitudes, the role of the church, the importance of philanthropy, the actor perspective etc. – even more emphasis than attributed to structural explanations. In this sense the project mirrors a genuine interplay between insights from the social sciences and from the humanities. I would without hesitation place the project at the border between the humanities and the social sciences.

The very first volume shows how the early development of the Danish welfare state took place in a complex interaction between changes of the economic structure, a power struggle between the interests of classes and risk categories, and a struggle between varying ideas and ideologies.

It is no mere coincidence that the very first chapter is titled “The period’s currents of ideas”. The period covers a number of examples showing that

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Om Løgstrups etiske fordring og den danske velfærdsstats normative grundlag” i David Bugge & Peter Aaboe Sørensen (red.) Livtag med *den etiske fordring*, Klim, Århus; Jørn Henrik Petersen & Lis Holm Petersen 2010, ”Manden der blev sin egen - Løgstrup og velfærdsstaten” i Nils Gunder Hansen, Jørn Henrik Petersen & Klaus Petersen (red.), *I himlen således også på jorden? Danske kirkefolk om velfærdsstaten og det moderne samfund*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense.

<sup>13</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen, Klaus Petersen & Niels Finn Christiansen, Dansk Velfærdshistorie vol. I, *Frem mod socialhjælpsstaten*, 2010; Dansk Velfærdshistorie vol. II, *Mellem skøn og ret* 2011; Dansk Velfærdshistorie vol. III, *Velfærdsstaten i støbeskeen* 2012; Dansk Velfærdshistorie vol. IV, *Velfærdsstatens storhedstid*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense.

<sup>14</sup> Jørn Henrik Petersen, Klaus Petersen & Niels Finn Christiansen, Dansk Velfærdshistorie vol. V, *Velfærdsstat i tidehverv* (2013); Dansk Velfærdshistorie, vol. VI, *Hvor glider vi hen?* (2014).

common values, norms and attitudes shared by a dominant group in society are important elements in understanding social policy and welfare.

A brilliant example is the change of ideas from the period of the Enlightenment to the strong liberal era of the first 70 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ideas of Enlightenment gave rise to a humane even modern social policy actually implemented in Copenhagen in 1799 and to a less marked degree in the other parts of the country in 1803. But deteriorating economic conditions, the diffusion of ideas from Great Britain into Denmark and the growing influence of the taxpayers first in the assembly of the estates and later in the parliament resulted in a basic change of social policy from the humanitarian regulations of the Enlightenment to the harsh poor laws of the liberal period.

The equal importance of the material and the ideational factors is demonstrated by the structure of volumes II to VI. They are all introduced by a chapter analyzing the social conditions of the period, i.e. the structure of population, the economic conditions, the political and institutional set up, the political culture, the ideological landscape, the main points of educational evolution, the labor market conditions, the international economic and political context, the parties and their views regarding the relation between state and individual, social cleavages, the doctrines of fiscal policy etc. That chapter is followed by a chapter titled “The landscape of social political ideas” developing the views and understandings of the political parties, the parties and the social movements as actors, the relations between science and social policy, the institutional frames and, finally but very important the chapter gives a presentation of “significant voices of the period” representing basic ideational positions in the debates of the day.

To give you an example picked up from the period 1898-1933 we chose the theologian Alfred Th. Jørgensen to represent the ideas embedded in Christian philanthropy, the economist Frederik Zeuthen as the first Danish profes-



sor of social policy and having close ties to the social Liberals, the poor law inspector and later leading social democratic politician K.K. Steincke, the national conservative author Jacob Knudsen strongly opposed to a societal intervention in welfare activities and the liberal professor of philosophy and politician C.N. Starcke. They are so to say spanning the specter of ideational positions.

Taken together the chapter on social conditions and the one on the ideational landscape form the frame for the analysis of say policies of old age pension, family policies, unemployment policies etc. To the established focus on social-structure variables stemming from economics and politics the project has added cultural, ideational variables. The human turn is an established fact underlying the analyses.

What were – volume V will ask – the cultural factors underlying the beginning erosion of the socio-political legitimacy base of the welfare state subsequent to the mid 1970's?

The single volumes of the project present the relation between values, ideas, world-views, ideologies etc. and the welfare state during a given period, and if you read two volumes following each other in time you will be able to catch also the relation between cultural changes, changes in world-views and reforms of the welfare state. If you take for example the two volumes still in the oven, the volume V will analyze the early appearances of what later had to be known as the New Public Management penetrating the understanding of public institutions during recent decades to such an extent that the NPM can be seen as steering the restructuring of the welfare state as analyzed in volume VI.

All volumes show how culture, ideas and world-views influence social policy, but simultaneously they show that social policy influences world-views, ideas and culture. The two phenomena are characterized by strong

feed-back mechanisms. There is no doubt that the views on work ethics governing a society influences the design of its social policy, but the social policy designed does at the next step influence the views on work and work ethics.

Or to take another example: The single individual was in the 1950's seen as a citizen with responsibility for the societal totality, but gradually he was turned into a user, a consumer and eventually a customer. Parallel to that movement the public sector was years ago seen as a mechanism for collective decision-making, but it has gradually been transformed into a system delivering services. These changes going hand in hand with NPM's penetration of our thinking have had an impact on the institutions of the welfare state, and these changing institutions do have repercussions at the ideational level.

I don't dare forecast what the eventual result will be. That is the reason why volume VI of the project has the title "Hvor glider vi hen?" ("Where are we sliding?").

### Why the call for a 'human turn'?

I could go on giving you examples of relations between ideas, values, culture and the developing "welfare state" – the last phenomenon put in inverted commas – because it means different things in different periods. But let me instead give you some suggestions explaining why there is a growing call for knowledge of the human in the social sciences – in turn opening new avenues for the humanities:

I have already mentioned the growing number of comparative analyses as a reason for the greater weight attributed to ideas and values (including religious values) embedded in culture. Another very important reason is the increased attention paid to the agency of individuals within and against the structures they are part of.

To understand basic welfare changes in the past we have to understand the complex interplay between symptoms of economic crises and ideational shifts. The same goes for our present conditions. With the first oil-crisis as an early indicator of structural problems that later turned societies into stagflation and eventually into recession fundamental values like mutual responsibility, caring for ‘the other’ or the stranger, solidarity with fellow citizens, compliance with the ‘order of being’ demanded by the welfare state, social commitments and obligations became hot issues – as they were in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

And to this we may add as yet another factor explaining the human turn the increasing influx of migrants that in some circles are seen as a threat to the sustainability of the welfare state as we know it.

### The most basic problem

Let these “Confessiones” be concluded with what I consider the very most basic question that we may ask and which we definitely cannot answer without many scholars from different backgrounds coming together.

The background for my question is my hypothesis on the normative reasons underlying the classical welfare state:

The welfare state as a utopia reflects the love of one’s neighbour as an unobtrusively reduced idea that is embedded in our culture – a political arrangement that considers the basic needs of all without taking a side-long glance at what he or she has been, is or will be in the future. The spontaneously consummated love has been reduced to a practicable idea that finds expression in our organising society as if we felt sympathy for each other – while being well aware of the fact that this is not the case. No one runs around and ‘loves his neighbour’, but there are many people who are forced to behave as if they did. That is the normative basis of the welfare state.

Such a society, however, is embedded with a number of inherent dilemmas which I am not going to unfold today. But the most basic of all basic dilemmas is the following:

If we, as suggested, see the welfare state as an attempt to realise a Christian universe of values in a modern society that is based on the separation of religion and politics, the fundamental dilemma of the welfare state comes sharply into focus.

For the Christian, there is an instance outside the world and outside history to refer to. When you are told to lay aside your own interests, God's acts are your model. The ideological basis of the welfare state, on the other hand, can only be justified by referring to itself. If the individual asks why he or she must display solidarity and act non-selfishly when this is not going to benefit the individual in question, this is precisely the question for which the welfare state can find no answer. It is, in a certain sense, dependent on a religious foundation that it has put behind it in the process of secularisation. It is vulnerable, because no ideology can make absolute demands if it only can refer to itself.

Ultimately, the problem of the welfare state is the inherent tension between the person who wishes to live in accordance with the order of being of the welfare state and the person who is prepared to let himself be governed by a private-economic rational ethos. To put it another way, the question is whether morality can control part of society while the other part is given over to being controlled on the basis of self-interest.

## A final word on literature

The cultural turn does not only mean development of relations between culture and welfare state research. There is also a growing awareness that literature itself is important. Literature knows “something” about the welfare state that you cannot know and cannot express in other modes. When – some weeks ago – I introduced the fourth volume of *Danish Welfare History* at the book fair in Copenhagen, I had invited two authors, Kirsten Thorup and Jens Smærup Sørensen to take part in a discussion about what the welfare state did to men.

Some years ago Thorup wrote a novel called ‘no man’s land’ – the land between life and death – a novel on life in the nursing home. The subject of our conversation, obviously, was: What do these institutions do – existentially – to men. An in-depth answer to such a question is in my opinion voiced by literature.

Jens Smærup Sørensen similarly has written ‘red-letter days’ – days not to be forgotten – in which he describes the exodus from farming, younger generations’ arrival to the urban part of the country, their education, their behavior etc. This exodus occurred simultaneously with the great period of the welfare state. What did that do to our norms of behavior? What did it mean to our interpersonal relationships? What did it mean to our existential understanding of life? Smærup Sørensen’s novel contributes to the answer to these questions.

Let these examples demonstrate my basic thesis on the relation between welfare state research and literature:

Literature may open the researchers’ access to knowledge and insights of the basic conditions of life because literature and ethics spring off from the same world of life. Thus, literature represents an approach to

reality which the social sciences cannot deliver and which – if lost – makes us all a bit more stupid.

The collaboration between the two projects “Welfare narratives. Studies on the role of authors and the subject of welfare in Danish post war literature” and “Danish Welfare History” mirror my basic view that the spirit of the age of the welfare state – as well as all other “ages” – defines itself as much in its literature and ideas as in political battles and societal strife.